Assessing a Writing Intensive General Education Capstone: Research as Faculty Development

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Abstract: We explain how collaboratively assessing a writing-intensive general education capstone seminar constituted a high-impact practice for faculty development. Students at the University of Denver complete an Advanced Seminar taught by faculty across the curriculum. Topics and themes vary widely, as do types of assigned writing, making assessment an ill-defined problem. Eleven professors each collected complete writings from five students, then met with the authors in a workshop to code and analyze these 468 artifacts. Participants also interpreted student questionnaires (both multiple-choice and open-ended questions) and wrote analyses of their courses. We present findings about the length, types, genres, and purpose of writings. We also present themes emerging from the workshop and analyses, most notably concerning mixed writing purposes and the tension professors saw between "standard" and "creative" assignment making. The assessment process fostered rich insights about individuals' teaching as well as about the nature of writing across the seminars.

"As is often true in life, what we have in mind is often not what happens in reality…. When our small group of ASEM faculty…came together to create a systematic way of defining and assessing good writing, we quickly realized that the good writing we all have in our minds is hard to capture systematically."

> — University of Denver Psychology Professor and Research Participant

Introduction

A typical trajectory for students in university-wide writing initiatives is from writing across the curriculum, manifested as writing to learn, toward writing in the disciplines, manifested as practicing particular genres within individual majors. It's not that the latter effaces the former; folks generally laud some writing-to-learn activities in courses at all levels. Rather, senior-level courses offer the opportunity, perhaps even the obligation, for more specialized kinds of writing. Students have accumulated a certain fund of a field's knowledge, commonplaces, and conventions; smaller courses offer places for them to produce knowledge for the field, often in sustained writings meant to approximate a field's scholarly or practitioner prose. Assessing those courses might reasonably take the form of analyzing how students manage those target discourses. That's no small task, of course,

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but it's a project with some boundaries: identify a target discourse and its features, devise an analytic or scoring guide, gather a sample of student texts, apply the guide, and so on.

Those boundaries aren't as obvious with senior-level courses *not* in the major. At the University of Denver, all undergraduates complete a senior-level "Advanced Seminar" as their final general education course, a capstone not of the major but of general education. While general education capstones are unusual, they aren't unique; a recent AAC&U survey found that 26% of responding member institutions had "capstone or culminating studies" as part of general education (Hart, 2016, p. 13). Our Advanced Seminars (ASEMs) are small (15 to 17 students) writing-intensive courses on varied topics taught by faculty from across the university. ASEMs are by definition "multi-perspectival." (Exploring the differences among "interdisciplinary," "multidisciplinary," and "multi-perspectival" would require another article.) What this means is that faculty propose topic-based ASEMs on a subject matter "of their passion," and students choose from among the 70-some offerings a course that interests them. What this also means is that faculty cannot presume specific knowledge on the part of all students in a class of senior chemists, accountants, social workers, political scientists, cellists, and so on.

Several intentions underlie the decision to constitute a senior capstone in this fashion, including challenging students to apply the skills and habits of mind they'd developed over their previous educations to a "new" issue or body of work. If perhaps the most notable trajectory of higher education tends toward disciplinary/professional/vocational affiliation, we wanted to remind students—and ourselves—of the civic and intellectual trajectories as well. In life beyond college, issues and ideas come ill-formed and rarely out of a strict disciplinary body of knowledge. Just as importantly, the groups of people who engage them are constituted out of different knowledge and belief backgrounds, and yet they have to find a way to proceed—and ideally, not simply through shouting or table pounding. We thought a fitting "end" of general education, albeit an extremely modest one, was to stage courses that looked to the kinds of intellectual spheres graduates join not as workers or scholars but as citizens. This perspective aligns with larger trends in general education reform, recognizing that "the focus of student learning is [now] on broadly defined competencies to ensure that students are well equipped to be responsible citizens and professionals" (Hachtmann, 2012, p. 19). The course aligns with the integrative liberal learning practices of offering upper-level interdisciplinary seminars that address "complex and unscripted problems" (Ferren & Paris, 2015, p. 2-3). It emphasizes liberal arts capabilities that employers consistently find vital, including critical thinking, written communication, and the ability to apply knowledge—we hope in ways that Carol McTighe Musil argues can yoke civic capacities with work skills. And, of course, as writing-intensive capstones, ASEM courses manifest two widely-accepted precepts of high impact practice.

A key implication of ASEM being a general education capstone is that faculty teaching these courses can't casually employ the kinds of implicit or explicit "writing in the majors" or "writing in the careers" tasks that are the customary fallbacks for senior-level courses; they must develop writing assignments befitting an advanced, mixed undergraduate student population. With such diversified student knowledges and backgrounds, and absent a shared disciplinary discourse and set of practices, what kinds of writing did faculty assign? How did students perform them? These were the framing questions we confronted. Because the situation was so richly complex, the three of us— faculty in a writing program whose mission includes "creating a robust culture of writing across campus"—decided to enlist our colleagues as co-investigators. That is, rather than devising and conducting assessment research, then bringing findings to faculty who are teaching ASEM, we took a messier route, enlisting them in the effort bottom-up; asking them what they wanted to assess and involving them in the decision-making process from the beginning; having them gather, describe, and analyze student writings—both their own and, more vitally, others'.

This essay describes our work with eleven ASEM faculty; we ultimately suggest that writing-intensive courses of this nature, taught and studied in this manner, have a high impact not only on students but also on their professors. Faculty in composition and rhetoric already recognize the strong connections between WAC and faculty development (Artze-Vega et al., 2013), but conversations about WAC assessment as development are scarcer. The discourse-based approach to assessment that Barbara Walvoord (1996) began advocating in the early 1990s positions faculty development as an effect of assessment; the "rich faculty talk about ways to improve curriculum and instruction in light of strengths and weaknesses in student performance on course-embedded assignments" (p. 7) is both a form of assessment and a form of faculty development. We suggest that this combination is a high-impact practice in itself, albeit one directed at faculty members. If certain kinds of curricular and pedagogical practices are well-understood as having stronger effects than others on student learning, so too do certain modes of assessment and faculty development. Most pointedly, our research project engaged faculty in addressing an ill-defined problem they found meaningful.

The value of faculty development is implicit in much of the recent research on high-impact practices. Tina Brown McNair and Susan Albertine (2012), for instance, suggest that "[i]ncreased attention to [HIPs]…has sparked new interest in faculty and staff professional development to prepare faculty to implement the practices" (p. 4). This is a logical formulation: faculty development is a necessary tool for delivering high-impact practices to promote student success (Roney & Carney, 2013; Laird, Lorenz, Zilvinskis, & Lambert, 2014). We might do more to recognize, however, that faculty are involved in high-impact practices not only as deliverers but as participants who themselves benefit from the experience.

Advanced Seminar Courses: Context and Content

In general, the vertical perspective that David Smit advocates in *The End of Composition Studies* seems increasingly to guide the profession's sense of writing beyond the first year, privileging sequenced classes with "an increasing level of domain-specific knowledge" (185). Susan McLeod and Elaine Maimon (2000) argue that in writing to learn contexts, the role of the teacher is "to act as the professional already involved in the conversation of that community, helping the novice, the student, enter the conversation" (p. 579). Researchers commonly seek to describe students' writing development from general education to writing in their majors, and faculty development emulates this move from Writing Across the Curriculum to Writing in the Disciplines. It's worth remembering with Christopher Basgier (2014), however, that "disciplinary participation does not drive all writing assignments in college courses" (para. 3). Advanced courses not organized by discipline have less precedence for research.

Four courses in the current University of Denver general education program specifically foster the high-impact practice of requiring students "to produce and revise various forms of writing for different audiences in different disciplines" (Kuh, 2008, p. 10). Of course, writing is ubiquitous in other courses on campus. Our longitudinal study shows that undergraduates write over 400 pages, and studies we've conducted on Writing in the Majors projects document significant amounts of writing in those majors. Each of the four designated courses is a one-quarter, four-credit offering taught in sections capped at 15-17 students. First, all matriculating undergraduates take a First Year Seminar (FSEM), a content-rich course organized around a theme chosen by their professor. FSEM courses are required to demonstrate "engaged learning," and nearly all sections enact that engagement through writing. Next, students take two courses taught by the writing faculty. "Rhetoric and Academic Writing" teaches analytic and productive arts for a variety of academic and civic situations, primarily focusing on argument. "Writing and Research" teaches connections between rhetoric and epistemology, with students writing in three academic research traditions—text-based,

quantitative, and qualitative—and engaging with disciplinary differences in expectations for researchers and writers.

Finally, juniors or seniors who have completed all other general education requirements take an Advanced Seminar, in which they are to "demonstrate the ability to integrate and apply content from multiple perspectives to an appropriate intellectual topic or issue." ASEM courses are capstone experiences—but of general education rather than of a major field. Faculty from across campus propose ASEM courses, which are evaluated and approved by a faculty committee. As one might imagine, topics vary considerably. In one quarter, for example, are courses on "Water and the West," "Philosophical Foundations of Mathematics," "Caring in a Capitalist Economy," and "Heavy Metal and the Re-enchantment of Modern Society." ASEM courses must be writing intensive:

1. Students will write a minimum of 20 pages (about 6000 words), some of which may be informal, but some of which must be revised, polished, and intended for an educated readership.
2. Students will complete a minimum of three writing projects that are distributed over the quarter; exceptions might include a cumulative project completed in multiple stages.
3. Students will revise some of their work based on feedback from their professor.
4. There will be some instructional time devoted to writing.

Anyone teaching ASEM is required to attend a three-day workshop, for which they receive $1000 (and which accompanies another $1000 for designing the course). These workshops focus on writing as a mode of learning, developing and sequencing writing assignments, the nature of writing development during college, response and grading, class time activities, and so on. We have multiple follow-up workshops and seminars, and faculty who chose to write an article about a course they've taught may earn $500. We've locally published two anthologies of faculty articles (Hesse, 2010; Hesse, 2014).

The learning outcome for writing in ASEM courses is simply that students will "write effectively, providing appropriate evidence and reasoning for assertions." That outcome privileges a certain kind of argumentative writing, a reasonable expectation but hardly the only one that could be valued in an advanced seminar. The outcome is silent about genre and audience. On the one hand, this gives faculty considerable leeway to define what they want to assign and teach. On the other, it leaves mysterious just how faculty design writing components, especially given advanced students coming from diverse backgrounds to a courses whose faculty are explicitly not to teach "yet another course in the major."

Methods

To understand how University of Denver faculty were assigning teaching writing in this situation—and how students were experiencing and performing it—we developed a multiple measures study whose artifacts included student surveys, syllabi and assignment analyses, student writings, and written faculty reflections. We generated these artifacts by inviting all faculty scheduled to teach ASEM courses one spring to apply as co-investigators.

Following established trends in WAC practices (Malenczyk, 2012; Haynes & Watson, 2009), we planned to spend time with faculty in a two-day workshop that would involve a great deal of conversation. Rather than present these conversations as training, however, we framed them as

research and assessment work. That is, instead of "closing the loop" by bringing findings to teachers for discussion, we chose "building the loop," involving them from the beginning in our most basic choices about what to assess. Ed Nagelhout suggests that faculty development "does not mean dictating activities or prescriptive approaches to teaching.... Instead, faculty development means that teachers have conversations about expectations, about standards, about definitions for successful writing, articulating the kinds of support structures necessary for their long-term success" (A16). Similarly, Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki (2006) recommend that "[t]eachers should regularly engage in group assessment of sample papers as a faculty development technique" (p. 158). Our goal was to make "rich faculty talk about ways to improve curriculum and instruction in light of...student performance on course-embedded assignments" (Bean, Carrithers, & Earenfight, 2005, p. 7), both a vehicle for assessing these writing-intensive courses and an end in itself.

Recruited faculty participants were to provide syllabi and writing assignments, select five students and gather all their writings, take part in a two-day workshop, and write an analysis of their own courses, receiving $1000 for these efforts. Funding allowed us to choose eleven professors from diverse disciplines, and the titles of courses in the final sample appear in Table 1. In exchange for permission for their work to be collected and for completing a brief questionnaire, student participants each received $20. A copy of the student questionnaire of attitudes and experiences appears as Appendix B.

Table 1. Course Identifiers and Titles in Sample

ID	Title
A	Thinking
B	Witchcraft and Renaissance Drama
C	Attachment, Trauma, and Culture: Reconnecting the Bridge of Child-Parent Relationships
D	Questioning Middle East News: U.S. Policy and Israel-Palestine
E	Sustainable Living
F	Gothic Trappings
G	Gender and Power in Africa
H	Art, Thought, and Spirituality
J	Sex, Gender and Rock & Roll
K	Forgivenes, Politics and Film
L	The Long Civil Rights Movement: Education and Social Change

Sixty students completed the questionnaire, and 63 agreed to provide writings, a total of 468 documents. (With two participating faculty each teaching two sections, the goal had been 65

students.) Faculty uploaded clean copies of student writings to a secure online site. We assigned each course a letter (A-M) and each student a course-specific identifier (A1, C2, J3). We then assigned a unique identifier to connect each document to a specific student and a specific class (A1.1, C2.5, J3.2).

Early in the spring quarter, we met with all eleven faculty to talk about their goals for the research and assessment process; we made decisions to focus on specific textual features as a result of this meeting. We also met individually with each faculty member for a half hour to learn more about the context for their courses, the kinds of assignments they were assigning, and so on.

One week after the term ended, the eleven faculty and the three of us met for two days. Our plan was to discuss responses from the student questionnaire, to have participants code the 468 documents, to interpreting that coding through discussion, and to send faculty off to write analytic reflections in light of the experience. From the corpus of gathered writings, we assembled randomly-selected packets of writings for each workshop participant, along with a common core of works for training and discussion purposes. We used a rubric adapted from the Writing Program's four-year longitudinal study to have participants code several features of the student documents: length, genre, primary and secondary source material, and purpose. Our goal in this step was to characterize, not to evaluate, these features. We next planned to have faculty score two additional features. One focus would be on that subset of writings whose purpose was argumentative, scoring them in terms of specific features of argument. A second would be to score how writings used source materials. Both studies were important given the course learning outcome to "write effectively, providing appropriate evidence and reasoning for assertions."

However, the rich complexity of our undertaking thwarted these last two efforts. We ran out of time. We were not surprised—though our colleagues were—that it proved difficult to agree on several writing features, most tellingly about the purpose of the writings and the nature of their source materials. Conversations were energetic and sometimes exasperated. Given our interest in this project serving as much a faculty development purpose as an assessment purpose—given that one of the purposes of assessment was being performed in the act of doing it—we saw our failure to complete all of the coding and scoring tasks as evidence of productivity rather than as cause for chagrin.

Findings from the Workshop Coding and Conversation

To give a flavor of what the workshop accomplished, the following sections present findings and interpretations from three areas of focus: student experiences and beliefs as represented by responses to five survey questions; trends in assignment type, genre, and purpose as a result of our analysis of student documents; and themes that emerged in the post-workshop faculty reflections.

Interpreting Student Experiences and Beliefs

At the beginning of the workshop, we presented a set of results from the student questionnaires, consisting of tabulated responses to all of the multiple choice questions and raw responses to the three open-ended questions. Our question was simple: What did our colleagues make of these? Figures 1-5 present results for five questions.

Figure 1. Student responses to the question "How would you characterize yourself as a writer at this point?"
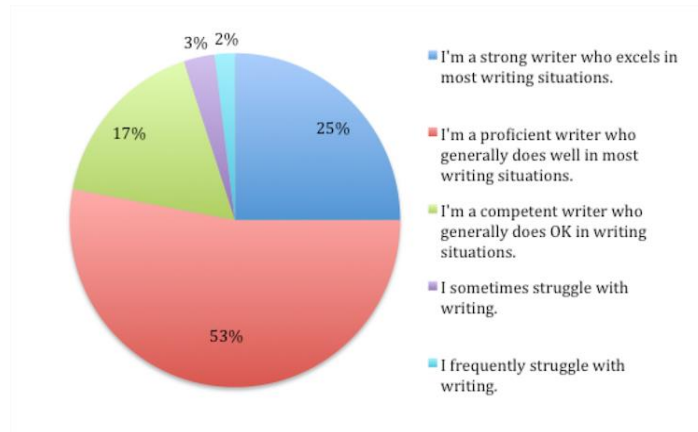

Figure 2. Student responses to the question "Compared to last quarter, how much writing have you been assigned for courses this quarter?"
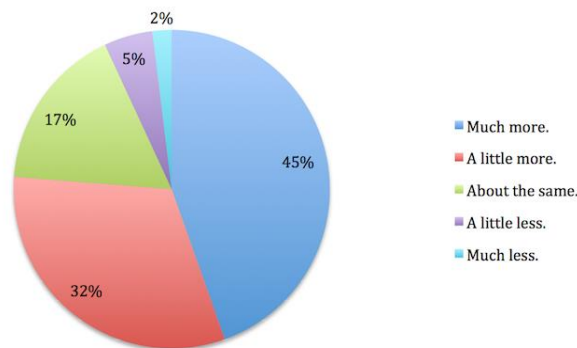

Figure 3. Student responses to the question "How important do you think writing will be in your career after graduation?"
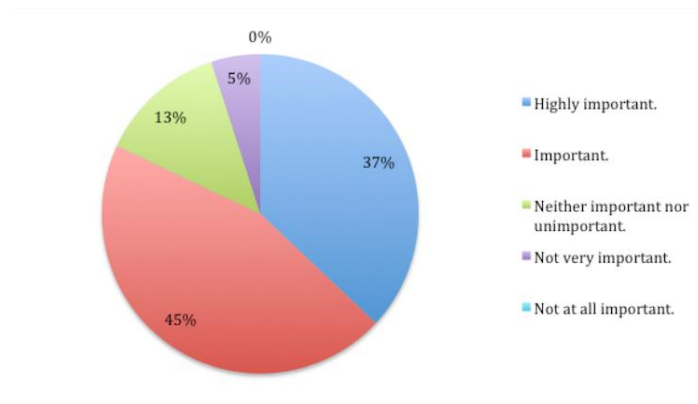
Figure 4. Student responses to the question "How important do you think writing will be in your personal and public life (life outside of work) after graduation?"
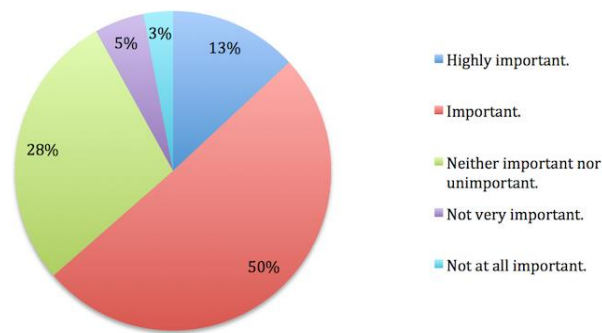

Figure 5. Student responses to the question "How would you characterize your general attitudes toward writing?"
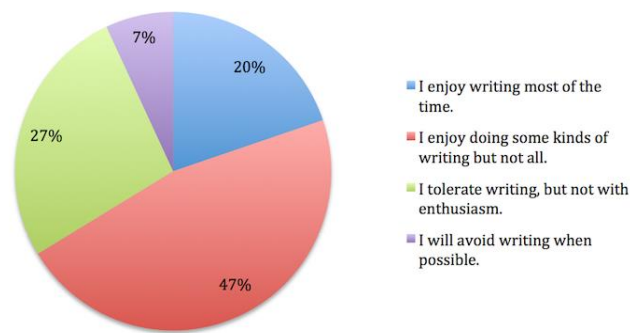
Faculty found generative the answers to several of these questions. They were struck, for example, by students' confidence in their abilities, with 78% considering themselves "strong" or "proficient," and only 5% reporting struggles (Figure 1). This self-perception, faculty thought, might account for some of the resistance students projected in response to comments for revision or to poor grades. They were also struck by answers to Questions 3 and 4, represented in Figures 3 and 4: 82% of students believed that writing would be important or highly important in their career after graduation, and 63% thought the same of writing in their personal or public life. On the one hand, students generally believed that writing mattered after college; any shortcomings of student writing couldn't be attributed to students' attitudes. On the other hand, students seemed to ascribe different importance to workplace vs. civic/social writing. What kind of non-work writing did students imagine themselves doing? How might this perception affect their regard for ASEM assignments that focused on social issues as opposed to vocational ones? Of course, it was beyond the scope of the workshop to answer these, although there was some methodological talk about how one might go about actually seeking an answer.

We related Question 5 to three open-ended responses: Q12: What has been the most enjoyable writing you've done this past year at DU? Why?; Q13: What has been the least enjoyable writing you've done this past year at DU? Why?; and Q14: What has been the most personally beneficial writing you've done this past year at DU? Not surprisingly, the group sought to categorize responses.

One of the interesting splits we noticed was between students who valued (or deplored) "creative" writing opportunities and those who valued (or deplored) "structured" ones. Another generative topic was how students' personal interests in a topic affected their enjoyment and learning. Consider four consecutive responses to the "least enjoyable" question:

> Research paper that was assigned in ASEM class. Since I am more of a numbers person and I did not have a lot of writing experience, I found it very hard to write about. I've probably spent about 4 sleepless nights during the week just to collect data and interpret it in my paper. (Response 37)

> Papers that seem pointless, for example, about a specific book that does not allow me to pull in other information and just wants me to discuss the specific book. Or pure research that is not interesting to me, but forced writing. (Response 38)

> reflection papers, elementary, busywork (Response 39)

> I disliked having to write personal journal entries about conflicts in my life for my Conflict Resolution course, largely because there aren't really any current conflicts in my life that are worth writing about. (Response 40)

As you might imagine from this brief sample, the implications of these comments provoked extensive conversation—and generated more questions. (For example, what did the writer of #37 mean by "data?") Representing that conversation would exceed the space of this article, but we'll note one consequence was to spur not only reflection on their own assignments but also deeper appreciation of the psychology of student writers. Engagement of some faculty with these issues is evident in their post-workshop reflections, as we discuss below.

How Much Writing? What Kinds?

The criteria for writing in ASEM courses allow any number of combinations of "formal" and "informal" assignments. For example, in "Thinking," Professor A assigned eighteen short exercises that posed critical thinking problems, while in "Sustainable Living," Professor D assigned a single long paper, in multiple sections and drafts. Three other faculty (E, G, K) had students develop a major assignment with feedback over the course of the quarter, although their students did other writing. In nine of the eleven courses, professors assigned three, four, or five formal assignments.

Table 2 shows the distribution of length of writings across various types of writings. These were "traditional" essays (paragraphs of connected prose); conventionalized reports (lab reports, business plans); writing to test content knowledge (essay exams, quizzes); writing to facilitate learning (lecture or reading notes, journals, discussion board posts); writing to support research projects (outlines, case notes); multi-media projects (slides, web pages, newsletters); creative projects (fiction, drama, foregrounded role-play).

Table 2. All Documents Coded for Length and Type

# of Pages	Essays, 1 Draft	Essays, 2 or	Conventionalized Reports	Writing to Test Content	Writing to Facilitat	Writing to Support	Multimedia Projects	Creative Projects	Total

		More Drafts		Knowledge	e Learning	Research			
<=1	6	18	0	12	195	1	0	1	233
2-4	34	33	1	6	49	7	1	7	138
5-7	48	7	4	2	5	2	2	5	75
8-11	11	2	0	1	0	0	0	3	18
12-15	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
16-20	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
21-25	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	107	60	5	21	249	10	3	22	468

On the whole, writings were short; only 22% of the documents we collected were more than four pages (see Table 1). As we speculate below, the preponderance of short writings, many of them informal, suggests that the message of "writing to learn" came across strongly in the faculty development workshops or that the nature of the ASEM lent itself to short writings—perhaps with some deleterious effects. In addition, faculty noted several times that our 10-week quarter complicates assigning long projects unless professors are able to scaffold them from the course outset.

Workshop conversations revealed the challenges of something as seemingly straightforward as counting and describing the writing students had done. For example, the line between "essay" and other kinds of writing stirred debate, with the criterion of something being "self-contained" not entirely useful. Some contended that the distinction between essay and other kinds of writing was invidious for no important purpose, which allowed us to bring up issues of audience for writing in the course, the whole matter of writing for only the professor as reader vs. for other readerships.

Many faculty noted that they'd had students do certain kinds of writing (and we could see it in their syllabi), but that they hadn't counted it as "real" writing worth collecting and uploading for the purpose of this study. The category of "Writing to Support Research," for example, is nearly empty in Table 2, but some faculty didn't consider things like annotated bibliographies or reading notes or peer review comments as documents worthy of collection. All the participants assigned informal writing, although we didn't see all of it. Six provided examples that included blogs, discussion boards, peer review, reading responses, or journals, sometimes on a daily basis, others on a weekly or bi-weekly. On average, in these six courses, students were assigned 13.5 pages of informal writing. For the remaining five courses, faculty syllabi and assignments described informal in-class writing, but students didn't provide any artifacts. Documents coded as "writing to facilitate learning" were

slightly in the majority, at 52% of the total. By this label, we mean writings that generally lacked some of the moves—introduction and conclusion, thesis statement, citation of sources—that might mark a piece of writing as freestanding; answers to questions that presumed readers knew the questions were a frequent example. Perhaps not surprising, 65% of the shorter (up to 4 pages) documents fit this category, as did 84% of those one page or less. The formal assignments showed a wide variety:

1. articles based on course content and research for online magazines and/or meant to explain course content by applying ideas to a hypothetical scenario for a popular readership (C, E, K);
2. essays that analyzed or applied a primary text from course reading (F, H, J, M)
3. parodies of literary texts (F);
4. essays that used primary and secondary sources to generate arguments about historical events/phenomena (B);
5. reports that presented information to a specific (sometimes academic) audience (G);
6. research essays for an academic audience (C, G);
7. response papers summarizing, exploring, or evaluating course readings (C, D, G);
8. personal narratives about experiences relevant to course material (J, M);
9. essays that synthesized course material and research into an argument (C, D, M);
10. short and long essays that asked students to argue or defend a position (H);
11. creative writing, like a slam poem accompanied by a reflection on the creative piece (M).

If this list suggests the range of forms that formal writing assignments took, it also hints at a variety of rhetorical situations and audiences. C, for example, asked her students to write as if they were speaking to school staff on behalf a child with a developmental problem, while D asked his to write to academics at a conference. In K's course, both major writing assignments asked students to expand their intended readership beyond the instructor; they wrote a researched feature article for an online magazine and posted weekly entries to a public blog. Shifting audience and cultivating students' more public sense of themselves as writers was key, in K's mind, to his course objectives. Asking students to consider multiple audiences helped K to "promote writing that demonstrated original thinking and students' ability to revisit course materials in creative ways."

To What Purposes Did Students Write?

When students were asked to write a page, they wrote a page. When students were asked to draft a formal essay, they drafted a formal essay. However, students often seemed not to write to an assigned purpose, mirroring the confusion that faculty participants also had when asked to assign each document one of the following purposes as primary:

1. Report, describe, summarize, or synthesize information, artifact(s), or reading(s)
2. Interpret, analyze, or apply information, artifact(s), or reading(s) [make and support observations about significance, meaning, assumptions, implications, constituent elements, etc.]

3. Respond to information, experience, artifacts, readings; share opinion, or evaluate based on experience [state agreement or disagreement, interest or disinterest, connection to existing/other ideas or events, etc.]
4. Argue or defend a position or action
5. Reflect on quality or features of one's own work [as in an introduction to a writing portfolio or as in a cover letter to or commentary on a project]
6. Other
7. Cannot be determined

Now, clearly, many writing tasks have multiple purposes. Arguments often rely on summaries of evidence from readings and analysis of others' claims, for example. In asking faculty to identify one purpose as superordinate, we were forcing a difficult choice. We also recognized the complexity of groupings; for example, ought synthesis really be grouped with summary and report rather than with analysis or application? In settling on these categories, we were again following ones we had established for the Denver Longitudinal Study of Writing and were trying to force differentiation.[1] In fact, there was often a lack of consensus over issues of purpose. While these proved problematic from a researcher standpoint, it was extremely generative for faculty development conversations.

As Table 3 shows, the most common coded purpose (48%) was to respond to information, experience, artifacts, or readings. About 20% of the documents were found to report, describe, summarize, or synthesize; 16% were found to interpret, analyze, or apply; and 11% were found to argue or defend a position. Fewer than 1% reflected on features of one's own work, and about 5% had a purpose that the coder could not determine.

Table 3. All Documents Coded for Genre and Purpose

Genre	Report	Interpret	Respond	Argue	Reflect	Other	Total
Essays, 1 Draft	44	31	11	12	1	2	101
Essays, Multi-Draft	7	16	15	21	0	1	60
Conventionalized Reports	5	0	0	0	0	0	5
Writing to Test Content Knowledge	16	1	2	2	0	0	21
Writing to Facilitate Learning	16	15	188	16	3	11	249
Writing to Support Research	6	2	0	1	1	0	10
Multimedia Projects	2	1	0	0	0	0	3

Creative Projects	0	4	10	0	0	5	19
Total	96	75	227	52	5	22	468

Essays showed the greatest variety of purposes, with 51 to report, 47 to interpret, 26 to respond, and 33 to argue. Writing to facilitate learning was more concentrated, overwhelmingly having the purpose of responding, with 188 in that category. Is there something inherent in "writing to learn" that privileges responding over other reasons for writing? Is there something about this group of faculty (their training, for example) that does? Or, perhaps, is there something in the way students do writing assignments, feeling compelled to respond even when tasks are asking something else? In other words, how many of these are in fact *meant* to be response papers, and is it possible that some of them represent some divergence—intentional or unintentional—from the assignment?

In fact, we compared the apparent main purpose of the assignments as written with what the artifacts showed students doing. There was often a disconnect. Consider two examples: Assignments in B's course consistently stipulated that "each essay will take a stance on the question" of what a range of documents revealed about a particular issue. Students were told to "argue for what you see as the primary" issue. But of the twelve student essays submitted, only one was coded as demonstrating this purpose. Eight were coded as reporting, describing, summarizing, synthesizing, and two were coded as interpreting or analyzing.

C's third assignment asked students to "imagine that you are the mentor for a preschooler, Sam." She described a very specific scenario, audience, and task:

> Prepare a "speech" that might give at the meeting to the school staff. Your purpose is to use your knowledge of attachment of trauma to help the staff understand why Sam might be behaving in this way. You want to persuade them to let Sam stay in the class....

The final paragraph of the prompt emphasizes the goal of being "convincing." It appears, then, that there are (at least) two purposes for this assignment: applying information learned from this course (2) and defending or argue a position (4). Obviously the two are closely related, but participants coded four of the five student submissions for this assignment as 2. Now, it may be that C's scenario was meant as a device to interest and engage students, but if this professor wants students to develop a strong argument, then there was a gap between expectation and performance.

We chose these two examples because they provoked lots of discussion among faculty participants and because the instructors themselves voiced concerns about the ostensible gap. The discrepancy might result from many things—students' struggle with difficult course material (B comments about this in her faculty reflection), students' deliberate choice to do something other than assigned, even miscoding by faculty raters. Setting aside the flaws in the categories themselves, we noted a wide variation among faculty in how they understood "analysis" or "analyze" or "argument." Faculty mean different things, depending on their disciplines, their familiarity with and preference for certain kinds of writing and research, their goals for their ASEM students. The discrepancies appeared often enough to concern faculty, many of whom returned to this theme in their written reflections.

Themes in Faculty Reflections

The results of our coding and survey efforts are worth having in themselves; it is useful to consider the patterns that emerge across assignments and papers in the ASEM courses. We've used the findings in subsequent workshops with different faculty, a point to which we'll return.

For the purposes of faculty development, however, the greater value in the coding was in the conversations it prompted and the thinking it motivated. This came through strongest in the reflections faculty wrote in the weeks immediately following the workshop. This writing gave them space and occasion to pursue matters that had arisen while puzzling at student writing from other classes and hearing colleagues puzzle about writing from their own. We have little doubt that the reflections would have taken a very different (and more limited) character had they not been preceded by the assessment activities.

C put it well when she noted that

> [w]hen our small group of ASEM faculty…came together to create a systematic way of defining and assessing good writing, we quickly realized that the good writing we all have in our minds is hard to capture systematically in actuality…. Through the experience of designing and teaching my first ASEM course, I realized that the picture I had in my mind of how to best teach writing to students was much harder to manifest in the classroom.

The reflections in general emphasize how faculty acknowledge their roles in teaching students to write and understand the importance of this work. But, as L wrote in her post-workshop narrative, "[translating] these commitments to pedagogical practice and student implementation is far from obvious." Even faculty who have been teaching writing-intensive courses for some time, as F noted, find it difficult "to balance teaching content with teaching writing." Acknowledgment of this difficulty, even among faculty who are motivated to teach writing well, came up at multiple points in post-workshop faculty reflections and in some cases prompted faculty to see their own practices in a new light. E, who had come into the workshop "feeling awkward" about having assigned a paper that he considered to be "lower order"—a paper that asked for synthesis of course material rather than a sustained original argument—commented that he

> notice[d] in our writing study just how difficult even this is for some of our students, and how many of the writing assignments of others are of a similar synthetic nature, so I'm feeling a little less sheepish about the whole thing. I do believe that, in this instance, it is the right kind of paper to assign for the content I am trying to convey.

K similarly found that she was "a bit relieved to see how difficult it still is to teach even college seniors to write a traditional academic essay." The experience of hearing other professors talk about their assignments and their classroom practices served a dual function: it gave faculty a wider range of pedagogical possibilities, and it reassured some of them to know that others were facing some of the same challenges that they were.

Purpose of Writing Assignments

The assessment question we initially set out to answer was what kinds of writing faculty were assigning in their ASEM courses and to what ends. Given the non-disciplinary focus and general education nature of these courses, we wanted to learn not just what purposes student writing addressed but also what purposes faculty saw for their students' work. In the absence of disciplinary

goals or discipline-specific audiences, why would students be writing? As preparation for more advanced academic coursework? In anticipation of civic readiness? Neither of these is explicitly a goal of writing in ASEM.

In the end, we found no real overwhelming consensus, either in the assignments as written or in faculty reflections about those assignments. Faculty noted a variety of goals: "to reflect on new and/or complex concepts" (C); "to "communicat[e] complex ideas, experiences, and critiques" (K); to "practice thinking" (A); to demonstrate "originality of...ideas and 'voice'" (J). The trend we did see was that, while many faculty mentioned as important accomplishing certain kinds of academic and/or analytical moves as writers or as a way to reflect mastery of course content, almost all (M, K, J, C, H, A, F and to some extent B) emphasized "writing to learn" vs. "learning to write" as an important distinction in their pedagogical approaches to teaching writing in their ASEM courses. K noted that the most useful part of the discussions on the second day was the idea "that the ASEM seemed to be set up as a 'writing to learn' class." She explained that she "see[s] the function of writing as exploratory, insight producing, reflective, and in general designed to stimulate either productive discussion (via Blackboard) or deeper levels of engagement with the course materials. [She] use[s] writing, in and out of the class, to get students to "grapple" with the intellectually and emotionally difficult concepts." Similarly, L was "interested in writing as a mode of discovering (invention), thinking deeply (writing-to-learn), and reflecting (learning through retrospection)." And D noted that he saw his goal "not so much to teach writing, but to help students learn content via writing and to learn to think via writing."

At least five instructors (D, E, F, J, L) talked about using assignment sequencing to move students through a series of steps, developing their writing skills and prompting them to deepen their writing/analysis/reflection in interesting ways. Most faculty explicitly linked assignments so that a student would need to revisit a previous assignment in constructing a new one. For example, H worked to foster "competence in stages, starting with short papers that challenge the student to engage with a specific and paradigmatic work of art and leading to the final 'reflective paper,' which requires a broad synthesis of all the material." In a few cases, faculty (A, B, F, J) took a different approach, assigning similar essays repeatedly throughout the quarter to enable students to become familiar with the kind of writing they were being asked to do. For example, A's students wrote daily short papers in which they presented an argument or defended a position, while J's students wrote blog posts that were in some ways mini-versions of their final paper. In these courses, repetition and feedback were central to how these instructors approached the teaching of writing.

The goal of having students generate an argument based on evidence was reflected explicitly in nearly all the syllabi, assignments, or faculty reflections, but this work did not always take the form of academic essays. Some ASEM faculty, in fact, saw their goal not as teaching students to write better college papers but as helping students to begin transitioning from college writing to professional writing. As C noted, "the majority of students graduating from college will not continue on in academia after they graduate. They likely will not have the need (or the desire) to write a traditional research paper or literature review." Considering the range of professional and personal writing students might encounter later in life, C recognized that a "course focused on writing research papers and more formal essays may miss some of the crucial skill sets needed in the modern world for students graduating from college today." A agreed, suggesting that "[if] we want students to be able to transfer their skills to tasks outside the classroom, faculty must have students practice using their skills on tasks highly similar to those that will be encountered outside the classroom." B wrote about her more general "hope that the kinds of writing she was asking students to do in ASEM will "transfer to their post-graduate lives so that they can better apply what they have learned throughout college

to interpret the world around them." J wrote simply that he wanted his students to have a "wider readership than just the course instructor."

Assignment Making and the Question of Creativity

Following closely from the question of purpose—to what ends were students writing if those ends were neither disciplinary nor audience-specific?—was a wide interest in creativity, an interest in student engagement through new genres or forms, doing "original" work. Perhaps this is because, in most cases, the "wider readerships" that faculty imagined were general. L wrote, for instance, that she "aim[s] to teach [her] students to write in different registers—in ways that speak to multiple audiences and across disciplines." It is important to note, however, that faculty were not necessarily "careerist" (L) in their approaches; individual faculty seemed less interested in helping students to learn and practice the writing skills they might need to draw on in a specific discipline or professional field than on more generally being able to struggle with new ideas, to be original, to think creatively.

In their reflections, some faculty expressed concern that although they felt their students improved in their critical thinking skills, the emphasis on formal analysis or teaching students more conventional academic discourse (essays that analyzed readings or prompted them to make more explicit arguments in relation to the course material) might have dampened or foreclosed students' creativity or their cultivation of new ideas. For example, G observed that "one of my battles ...is how to put more stress on creativity and originality in thought and of work." She reflected that she found many of her students' writing and the writing she read in the workshop as "proficient or somewhat proficient in terms of synthesis and analysis," but that it "tend[ed] to be poor in terms of originality of work." Ultimately, she wondered how we might be better teach creativity in a critical context like ASEM courses.

Similarly, F noted that "attention to claims and supporting evidence largely produced well-written essays with clear topic sentences and close attention to selected evidence," yet he ultimately felt that "many of these essays lacked the creative ingenuity that I was hoping to find." F noted that he plans to allow students more freedom to explore ideas in the early stages of an assignment and then later asking them to attend to matters of thesis, textual analysis, and argument shaping. He hopes that such a change will lead his students to think more imaginatively about the assignment.

A number of ASEM professors assigned less conventional assignments to good effect. For many of her in-class, informal writing assignments, C used creative writing exercises that asked students to connect their personal experience to course content. She found that in these assignments, "students' writing was creative, alive, and enjoyable to read." Ultimately, C found that such assignments balanced out the rigorous academic expectations of her more formal assignments. In the end, she wondered, "Perhaps more informal creative assignments versus long essays—even of varying formats and contexts—allow students more freedom to experiment with their writing and develop additional writing skills." As C's comments suggest, students gain much as writers by being able to write within a wide range of situations and expectations.

More creative formal assignments ranged from parodies of literary texts to speeches in which students assumed the role of an advocate to slam poems performed at a local open-mic event. What made assignments more "creative" had mostly to do with nonacademic genres, audiences, or purposes. Other forms of creative variations from traditional essayistic literacy were scant; we saw only three "multimodal projects," and even works that had significant digital elements (images, or links to videos, for example) were largely absent. For L "the spoken word poems were inspired and others were fine and one or two were mediocre, they were all very different from previous student writing." These differences struck her as especially important, for this kind of assignment allowed

different students to shine as writers in her class, drawing as it did on different ways of approaching writing. "Two students in particular," she noted, "one through a story about his father and one through a poem which included jazz singing, expressed themselves in remarkably different and compelling ways. In some ways two of my least engaged students really shone that night."

Some faculty did note that unconventional writing projects presented challenges, although those challenges did not include evaluation (which can often be the challenge for faculty members with less experience with these kinds of assignments). Instead, the concern was how to teach a creative approach that was still grounded in critical thinking. B noted that students enjoyed writing his parody assignment, which asked students to parody the conventions and characters of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Still, he suspected that "students had difficulties balancing their imaginative configurations with close attention to the text at hand." F plans to assign the project again but focus students' attention "on the fact that parody carries out a rather explicit critical argument that draws on all the analytical skills dealt with earlier in the course." Faculty saw the value of teaching students argument and analysis through such unconventional assignments. As J concluded, such work "makes me think about opportunities for different modes of writing and different ways for students to make compelling arguments."

In the end, professors in this project confirmed an obvious, but extremely important, point: the teaching of writing should attend in some way to enjoyment: not just for the students but for faculty as well. J wrote that in reading about "Led Zeppelin's masculine and feminine sides…, why disco doesn't 'suck,' and how female hip hop artists can turn the tables on male rappers," he had good reading experiences and also learned something new, "a selfish, but…valid indicator of quality of student writing and learning." And L noted that in writing assignments she has "tried to live up to what I have learned over years of teaching. I enjoy reading papers that have more interesting, inviting, innovative prompts, and students often prefer writing them. Writing is better when we all enjoy ourselves along the way."

Assessment as Faculty Development

Whether writing about purpose, genre, creativity, or something else, most of the faculty reflections suggested particular ASEM teaching challenges and explored possible revisions. The workshop and reflection certainly prompted these moves, but as workshop facilitators we did not make specific recommendations to this effect. Some faculty reflected broadly on the goals of ASEM, as when A suggested that "[w]e must challenge students: Faculty need to make sure their writing assignments require higher order thinking skills if faculty are to help students obtain such skills." But more often, faculty considered specific challenges they had faced in their sections.

Some, for instance, expressed concern that their expectations might have been too high. For B, the level of difficulty of her course work remains a "nagging question." When teaching course content that might be less familiar to non-majors or non-specialists, anticipating student frustration or confusion—and providing the right kind of instructional support—is key, for when the reading is difficult, writing about such material is even more so. For B, despite her students' diligent work, "[a]bout one third of the class never quite reached the level of being able to back up their claims with evidence consistently. About another third ever could quite organize their argument around one main point, often saying the equivalent of the scatter-shot thesis." Similarly, D realized that the challenging level of content in his course "probably diminished that goal that I had: To get them to think via writing." D wrote in his reflection about the challenging nature of the course work he assigned and suggested that he may have asked students to do too much, or do too much that was

too challenging. He realized that "these assignments are even challenging for professors who study in these content areas (myself, included)."

For C, this question was particularly relevant. "I realized," she wrote, "that when I was thinking of teaching students how to write, I had in my mind the graduate-level students with whom I usually work." Even though she worked hard to clarify her expectations for each assignment, as the course progressed, she realized that her assignment prompts and the work that they outlined was graduate-level work. More accustomed to working with students who already had a higher facility with writing about difficult material, C concluded that she may need to "think about how students learn to write and how to teach to the level of writing development at which they currently function."

Especially interesting was the fact that several faculty commented on the value of the workshops themselves in helping them to clarify goals, rethink assumptions, and plan pedagogical changes. These often crystallized around writing to learn assignments and revision. K commented that the workshop had led her to make two important observations about her work: first that she "leans much more in the direction of 'writing to learn' than 'learning to write,'" and second that she would like to find ways to "use in-class writing to, at a minimum, teach a skill like mining evidence effectively to support an argument" or "synthesizing the insights of more than one author in a paragraph." The idea that emphasizing writing to learn as a practice did not necessarily have to mean sacrificing the goal of students improving as writers was novel to K and prompted her to consider how she might use this practice differently in her next ASEM. Other reflections made similar observations. F, for example, noted a tension between implementing writing to learn, which facilitates better thinking but "takes a significant amount of in-class time," and formal papers, which did "not always translate into students internalizing" course content. He planned to integrate revision activities in all kinds of writing, not just formal papers. He hoped that "encouraging students to think about their writing recursively...[will help them] become more self-conscious about and invested in the process of writing, and have the opportunity to revisit their ideas and reconfigurations of the content we have explored in and out of class."

Several faculty commented explicitly on the richness of the workshop experience. K noted her enjoyment in "getting to know some colleagues more" and "learn[ing] about the range of classes being taught in ASEM," and E wrote about the distinction between learning to write and writing to learn, which we discussed on the final day: "although I've long recognized this distinction in my own writing as a scholar, it was a revelation to think of it as part of my writing pedagogy." Many of the comments in the reflections did not stop at individual faculty development but raised questions and issues that went beyond their individual classrooms:

- "It would be well worth a systematic assessment in the future of how writing both canalizes and crystallizes the separate 'common curriculum' goals that cluster around the relatively vague notion of critical thinking" in ASEM (H).
- "[I]n our June workshop it was clear that there are divergences between disciplines on what are the requirements for proficient reasoning and writing.... We may want to consider...how can we effectively engage students to go beyond disciplinary specificity and goals" (G).
- We should find more ways to assess writing, to "surface some interesting models that might inspire us to expand our approach or at least subject our assumptions and intentions to scrutiny" (K).

These suggestions attest to the richness of our workshop as faculty development, the repeated use of "we" indicating the extent to which faculty saw themselves as part of a collective endeavor as researchers and assessor. There was a general sense that the faculty had a real desire to see the conversations begun here continued and to see efforts made to enliven and enrich future assessment measures. Here, then, is where we locate the potential of this assessment / faculty development work as high-impact practice. In the case of this workshop, the faculty themselves benefitted—and saw those benefits—from participating in assessment of their students' writing.

This work is behind the scenes of the kinds of courses and other engagement experiences that make up the AAC&U's list of high-impact practices: assessment, research, and faculty development may seem to be activities that support those HIPs but are not an essential part of them. And yet, as HIPs become a more entrenched part of the standard college experience, we will need to pay attention to how we assess them, research them, and talk about faculty's role in them, especially when it comes to writing.

Conclusion

That faculty found valuable a WAC workshop focused on assessment of student writing and faculty assignments is hardly surprising. WAC workshops have generally cultivated enthusiasm among participants, for reasons ranging from the practical ones of sharing new practices for assigning and teaching with writing to the collegial ones of catalyzing faculty conversations about teaching across campus divisions. We hope that this study contributes to the thinking about high-impact practices as a site of rich learning experiences for faculty as well as for students. Assessing student writing and of writing-intensive courses is a primary vehicle for assessing general education capstone courses like ASEM, and that assessment leads not only to (ideally) enhanced student success but also to faculty development. In this, we are suggesting that we expand the notion of what high-impact practices are, where they are located, and whom they benefit.

Our study contributes perhaps more to WAC lore by offering a model for involving faculty in addressing some ill-formed questions from the ground up, trying to analyze a wide (even messy) range of student writings to understand course-category practices and to shape what those practices should be. Beyond enriching conversations during the two-day workshop itself, the workshop constituted a sort of extended pre-writing for the reflections that professors wrote afterwards. Those reflections were clearly informed by the process. The whole project was, therefore, an extended faculty development experience. Participants came away knowing more about their own assumptions and options, especially in relation to those of their colleagues; knowing more about the nature of assessment and research complexities in writing; and knowing more about the challenges of articulating the purpose for teachers assigning writing in a capstone general education course.

This last point merits elaboration. We began this article by noting the problem of defining what kinds of writing were most appropriate in an advanced general education course that could assume neither a common fund of disciplinary background knowledge nor a common set of experiences writing in a discipline. Faculty teaching introductory courses—whether in majors or in general education— always face this problem. However, they at least have the fallback position of preparing students for future writing: getting them ready for the next class. The Advanced Seminars at the University of Denver don't, because in a certain sense, there is none. As we explained at the outset of this article, perhaps the most important value underpinning the ASEM requirement is to rehearse one last time the practice of encountering new topics, issues, and problems in the way that educated people do in life outside majors, with people who don't share similar educations; we wanted to complement, very modestly, the disciplinary trajectory with a general education trajectory. If anything, ASEMs might

be seen as "getting students ready" for the kinds of writing that college graduates might ideally do in their extra-disciplinary, extra-professional lives: writing as civic and social beings on matters of intellectual and social interest and import. However, that's generally not the kind of writing that we found with our colleagues. Neither did we find very much disciplinary discourse (or writing that was trying to be). Instead, we found an amalgam of generic academic discourse, generally performing cognitive work with texts and ideas; of writing-to-learn opportunities, where fostering student engagement with new material predominated over writing for "outside" readers; and of "creative attempts," in which students were invited to write for an engaging scenario or in a genre outside the academy. These last two make considerable sense in light of ASEM's curricular position. Many colleagues report enjoying teaching Advanced Seminars because doing so allows them to indulge interests that don't fit majors or disciplines. We speculated, in fact, that faculty might see ASEMs as something of a vacation (albeit a demanding one) from their main teaching trajectory. We know from our longitudinal study of writing that many students regard it the same way. After progressing through required curricula in marketing, engineering, history, or studio art, many students find ASEM a sort of breath of fresh air, a new tack from a relentless course, a tack they've chosen out of interest.

Now, the current mix of writing assignments and purposes may be just fine, even sensible, given the course circumstances. Still, we couldn't help wondering if writing in this, our last general education course, shouldn't have more of a capstone cast to it. In terms of the amount and kinds of writing, and in terms of the integrative nature of the courses, the ASEMs are surely demonstrating high impact practices, but are they doing so in any way that distinguish them from high impact, lower-level gen ed courses? Would certain types of course projects more fully display "capstone-level" productions? Might faculty, for example, have students more intentionally write for serious popular audiences, engaging the challenge of bridging academic knowledge for nonacademic readers? Might faculty require "original research?" And what would "original research" look like in the absence of shared disciplinary knowledge? These are questions we didn't resolve during the project—and, in fact, haven't resolved yet. However, drawing upon the study we've just described, they are questions that we've raised in subsequent faculty development workshops, and we've done so more productively precisely because of the questions and ideas generated by working in concert with our eleven colleagues.

Appendix A - Invitation to Faculty

The ASEM Committee, in collaboration with the Writing Program, invites 10 interested faculty to join a quarter long project investigating student writing in ASEM courses. Participants selected will receive $1000 in exchange for engaging in the following activities:

1. Meeting twice as a group (about an hour each time) in the early spring 2011 quarter to discuss data collection, set up a student questionnaire, gather faculty interests, and characterize the project outcomes.
2. Provide a copy of all writing assignments made in a spring ASEM course.*
3. Randomly identify five students in the course and keep copies of all of their writing during the quarter. (We will analyze some or all of these artifacts at the end of the quarter.)

4. Have students complete a brief questionnaire at the end of the quarter about their writings and their attitudes toward writing, not only in this course but in general at DU.

5. During June, write a brief (page or two) reflection on how they thought writing functioned in the course, including their impressions of student accomplishment and their efforts teaching and grading writing.

6. Attend a two-day workshop in June where we will analyze the writings collected, characterizing the kind of strategies students use and describing how well they "write effectively, providing appropriate evidence and reasoning for assertions." During these meetings we will also generate preliminary findings and recommendations. A couple of faculty from the writing program will join the group to provide expertise and analysis help and to glean information for the final report.

7. In August 2011, read and respond to a draft of a final report on this project. A writing team will incorporate these responses into a final draft, which will be available in September.

To apply for this initiative, please send an email to Doug Hesse (dhesse@du.edu; copied to Amy Kho at amy.kho@du.edu). In your email, provide your name, department, and the title of the ASEM course you're teaching. Also include a sentence explaining your availability and willingness to take part in all aspects of the project. Optionally, include a sentence about your interest in the project.

If more faculty are interested than spaces are available, a subcommittee of the ASEM committee will choose from the applications, first looking at breadth and diversity among types of ASEM courses and departments in the mix, next (if needed) looking at a mix of relatively senior and relatively junior faculty.

Emails of interest are due to Doug by March 1, 2011, and the project team will be announced by March 15. Please contact Doug with any questions.

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Notes

[1] For the design of the longitudinal study, please see http://www.du.edu/writing/media/documents/du_longitudinal_study_writing_overview.pdf. The longitudinal study research group has presented findings from this study at several national conferences, including CCCC and WRAB, and continues the lengthy process of analyzing and reporting on this work.

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